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ABSTRACT

A language education specialist who has studied elementary school second language programs, primarily in France but also in other European countries, outlines the factors he has found contributing to program success and makes recommendations for further development of second language education in Europe. Seven conditions for effective programs of foreign language in the elementary school (FLES) include: (1) well-trained teachers, competent in both the target language and teaching techniques; (2) established provision of pedagogical support in the form of inservice training; (3) adequate scheduling; (4) suitable teaching materials; (5) continuity; (6) liaison between elementary and secondary education; and (7) integrated evaluation and quality control. It is argued that early second language programs not only have potential for success, but are also highly recommended to develop the bilingual skills needed in a unified Europe. The Bulgarian example of bilingual secondary education is described. Thorough language teaching reform in each country is recommended, perhaps beginning with a network of bilingual schools, elementary and secondary, in each region where conditions for success exist, with later expansion. It is also proposed that a broad variety of second languages be taught. A list of questions for group discussion is appended. (MSE)

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EARLY MODERN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Conditions of success

by

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SUMMARY:

A. **Dual interest in the theme:"Early modern language learning: conditions of success".**

1) active interest since 1954, subsequently illustrated by two documents:

* 1974: report on research carried out in France over a period of one year at the request of the Minister of Education. This report analyses the conditions for success of "Early modern language learning."

It is interesting to compare the conclusions of this report with those also put forward in 1974 by C. Burstall in "Primary French in the Balance".

* 1992: Guide de l'anglais précoce" analysing, among other things, the "lessons learnt" from previous experiments.

2) renewed interest for some years now since the principle of early modern language learning has also been applied to the advantages of a bilingual or multilingual schooling.

* eg Bulgaria with its impressive network of "bilingual secondary schools" using not only Bulgarian but also German, English or French as teaching languages.

* "natural bilingualism" and "artificial bilingualism" within the family, as arguments in favour of bilingual schooling.

B. Proposals for the expansion of bilingual schooling in Europe

* the need for a new, clearly defined language-teaching policy to be drawn up at both national and international level;

* for example, what should and could be done in a country like France;

* it is interesting to note that a motion for a resolution has been tabled in the European Parliament with a view to defining a new strategy for the teaching of languages, from nursery school to university, using two European languages instead of only one as the medium of instruction.

Among the seven aspects of the general theme which we will study in detail, this workshop on "the effectiveness of modern language teaching and learning" includes under point 3.2, "Early modern language learning (6-12 year olds) - conditions of success".

I immediately expressed my particular interest in this sub-theme for which Professor Anne-Marie Peltzer-Karpf was appointed rapporteur. There are two reasons for this interest. Firstly, as of 1954 (more than forty years ago!), I was one of the first persons in France to take part in experiments in learning a foreign language - in my case English - at primary school. My active interest in the subject has not diminished over the years. I first spent a whole year (1973-1974) researching and assessing the French experiments, following which a 270-page report was published by the French Ministry of Education under the title *"Enseignement précoce des langues vivantes"* (GIRARD, 1974). Many years later, in 1992, I was the co-author of a *"Guide de l'anglais précoce"*, also published in English under the title *"The Primary English Teacher's Guide"* (BREWSTER, ELLIS, GIRARD, 1992) and I am also the author of several articles on the subject.

The reasons for "success" (or failure, or partial success) in the teaching/learning of modern languages in general, and in particular at an early age, have always appeared to me to be fundamental.

At the risk of appearing to be reactionary, I would first like to say that the seven **conditions for success** that I set for myself in 1974 when carrying out my research/evaluation still appear to me broadly valid today:

1. **well-trained teachers** (competence in both the language taught and teaching ability);

2. **established provision of pedagogical support** (in-service training)

3. **adequate timetabling**

4. suitable **teaching material**

5. **continuity** throughout

6. **liaison between primary and secondary school**

7. integrated **control and evaluation**

Our *Guide de l'anglais précoce* draws on "past experience" and therefore includes these criteria, in addition to what we have called "the main lessons" learnt from experiments carried out in various European countries, in particular Germany, Austria, Denmark, France, Italy, the United Kingdom and Sweden, as well as the conclusions and recommendations of major

congresses and colloquies organised by UNESCO, the Council of Europe and international associations such as IAAL and FIPLV. We have summarised these *main lessons* under the following five points:

- advantage should be taken of certain children's aptitudes to start teaching them a foreign language at primary school;

- it is not really possible to postulate an optimal age for starting to learn a foreign language; the best age may depend on the country and the linguistic situation; the results of other tests often suggest the age of nine as the optimum;

- the learning of a language which is not the pupils' mother tongue should be integrated into other subjects taught at primary school;

- the language should always be taught with a view to facilitating its further acquisition at secondary school;

- the linguistic and teaching skill of the teachers is certainly one of the most important factors.

I am, of course, prepared to answer any further questions on these *main lessons* and the conditions for success.

However, as I had the opportunity to work in liaison with Clare Burstall and published a report on the same subject in the same year (1974), I would like to give my point of view on her final report, entitled "*Primary French in the Balance*" (BURSTALL & al. 1974), which is mentioned in our bibliography. It is the conclusion of a longitudinal study by a team of researchers at the National Foundation for Educational Research, led by Clare Burstall, which was commissioned by the Department of Education. The "negative research evaluation" mentioned, which dealt a mortal blow to the British experiments, is based mainly on the last sentence of the book (p.246), which is printed in bold type:

"Now that the results of the evaluation are finally available, however, it is hard to resist the conclusion that the weight of the evidence has combined with the balance of opinion to tip the scales against a possible expansion of the teaching of French in primary schools."

Despite its rather convoluted style and its use of understatement, this sentence was immediately seized on by the English local education authorities concerned as a pretext for terminating experiments which were stretching their purses at a time when they were having to restrict their expenditure. In putting an immediate end to the teaching of French in primary schools, they went far beyond the suggestion made in the report, i.e., that it was not advisable to expand the French any further. This explains the dismay and despondency of those who had committed themselves wholeheartedly to this new enterprise, one which did not seem to them to be entirely negative. Moreover,

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from reading the entire Burstall report, and not only the last five lines, one finds that the NFER researchers also pointed out that the pupil cohorts who learned French between eight and eleven years of age had "statistically significant" advantages, especially in oral understanding and in speaking French, over those who only began to learn the language at the age of eleven. They also drew attention to another positive element which could have considerable repercussions on further schooling: those children who started French in primary school had a more positive attitude towards the French language and culture than other pupils, who often showed no interest whatsoever. It is a pity that these positive aspects were not included in the book's conclusions.

By way of comparison, I would like to quote some significant excerpts from the conclusions to my own report on the experiments carried out in France:

" The purpose of this report was to make as detailed and accurate an assessment as possible of the experiments carried out in the learning of modern languages at primary school level in France...

Analysing the vast amount of information gathered for the purposes of this survey as objectively as possible, it is impossible to conclude that the experiments were a failure, as has happened in other countries. However, it is not possible to talk of complete success either.

Provided that the experiment is carefully conducted and suited to the age of the children, learning a foreign language at an early age, if devised as a discovery activity, has the advantage that the children are highly motivated. It may play an important educational role without adversely affecting other subjects, as has often been proven, eg in this report.

The overall outcome of the French experiments include, as we have seen, undeniably positive elements which make it difficult to dismiss the whole experiment because of a few dark areas in the picture..."

With regard to lessons learnt from past experience, I would like to make a further comment on the age at which children should begin to learn a second language (not the mother tongue). We have been talking about primary schools, but I would even be in favour of beginning, **if possible, in nursery schools.** We now have proof that it is never too early to start, always provided that the learning situation is appropriate (nine appeared to be the most suitable age at the time when the "Guide de l'anglais précoce" was published, in the context of new controlled experiments in France). Existing plans in France now provide for the widespread teaching of a second language from age seven. If the aim is to provide a bilingual or multilingual schooling (an aim which is bound to become more frequent in forthcoming years), then of course the earlier the better, circumstances permitting.

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This question of bilingualism will be dealt with under item 3.5 of our agenda in answer to the question, "How effective is bilingual schooling ?". I would also be glad to take part in that discussion.

What I have sometimes called my "p[illegible] for bilingualism" is not only aimed at increasing the [illegible]rical superiority of bilingual or multilingual people in t[illegible]orld, which is already widely recognised. What motivates me most is my determination to continue the battle I have always fought, along with others, throughout my career as a teacher and a specialist in language teaching, for a marked improvement in the results of modern language teaching and learning, particularly in a Europe which must unite to meet the challenges facing it at the dawn of the 21st century and of the new millennium.

One of the most convincing examples of bilingual schooling I have come across in recent years is in Bulgaria, where two years running I was fortunate enough to visit classes in bilingual secondary schools and attend colloquies and in-service training seminars for the teachers of those classes. This country, with 8 million inhabitants and limited resources, has succeeded in setting up an impressive network of 88 bilingual secondary schools offering a variety of languages, which could serve as an example for Western Europe: in 29 of these schools French is the second language, in 33 others it is English and in the remaining 26 German.

Bulgarian schools do not teach these languages at an early age, as children are not admitted to bilingual secondary schools until 13 or 14 years of age; however, pupils are selected according to their results in Bulgarian and mathematics at primary school. Two effective methods have also been devised to ensure the successful use of foreign languages as a medium of instruction in, first two, and later four, school subjects:

- in the first year, called "zero-year", 20 hours per week are spent learning the new language;

- the teachers are specialists in both the subject taught and in the foreign language in which it is taught (many of them were themselves pupils in bilingual schools). (F.I.P.F., 1994).

Several countries in Central and Eastern Europe have followed the Bulgarian example, eg Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary. However, the principle of the "zero-year" (with all other subjects apart from the mother tongue"put on hold") would perhaps be rather difficult to adopt in more traditionally liberal school systems such as those of Western Europe, where it would seem preferable to combine bilingual schooling with the teaching of a foreign language at primary or, if possible, nursery school level.

The obvious benefits of bilingual schooling from the earliest age are proven by the experience of all those who, like myself, were fortunate enough to be introduced in their family environment to two languages at the same time (for me, French, the language of my parents and Provençal, the language most often spoken by my grandparents in the rural area of the Durance valley). I have always believed that this experience was decisive in my choice of studies and my decision to become a language teacher. It is a well-known fact that such natural bilingualism is widespread throughout Europe and the entire world.

So-called bilingual or multilingual countries, such as Belgium, Switzerland and Luxembourg, where several widely-spoken languages coexist, have considerable advantages despite the problems of linguistic quarrels which may afflict them.

Besides "natural bilingualism" within families, where both parents of a young child have a different mother tongue and only communicate with their child in that language, there already is, and will no doubt increasingly be, a so-called "artificial bilingualism" where one member of the family communicates with his/her children or grandchildren not in his/her mother tongue but in a language of which he/she is virtually a "native speaker" by virtue of teaching that language or having lived for long periods in a country where that language is spoken (cf. MONSAURET, 1992). For the past four years I myself have been conducting the same exciting experiment with my 4 1/2 year old grandson: we speak to one another only in English, and this has not only taught both of us a great deal but also, given us tremendous pleasure. I would be happy to provide any further information that might be considered useful in this connection.

The main point I wish to make in conclusion is that, in Europe where the aim is not to abolish frontiers or the wealth of the continent's diversity but rather to profit from that diversity by promoting exchanges and mutual understanding, the time has come to undertake a thorough reform of language teaching in every country, turning to fullest advantage the teaching and learning of languages at the earliest possible age, instead of settling for mini-reforms which never achieve their objectives - partly because the means deployedare never sufficient - as has so often been the case in France.

What I suggest is not beyond the bounds of possibility, if we are prepared to admit that it cannot be achieved simply by the wave of a magic wand. I am not talking about ordering the immediate application of bilingual schooling to all children from nursery school to university throughout our educational systems.

However, it would be possible to set up an initial network of bilingual schools in each country - if this has not already been done - and in each region within the country, in places where the conditions for success exist (specially trained teachers, motivated parents, etc). This schooling could be

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provided at both primary and lower secondary level. For example, in France a "Monde bilingue" delegation has suggested to the Ministry of Education that this could be achieved by first setting up one school in each *département*, ie 90 in all, which is by no means excessive in a country of 58 million inhabitants, compared with the 88 bilingual schools in Bulgaria which has a population of only 11 million inhabitants. We have pointed out to the Ministry of Education that in order to launch this operation the French government would have to draw up a more ambitious policy on secondary education to ensure that, in the long run, pupils have both the ability to communicate effectively in two languages (French and another European language) and a good grasp of another foreign language. The operation would be financed by local authorities and the state in accordance with a ratio yet to be decided.

It is also important to strive to ensure that there is an appropriate spread of the languages chosen in addition to the national one. The application of this principle in all member countries of the European Union and the Council of Europe would provide better safeguards than any other measure for the preservation of Europe's linguistic diversity, which we all value very highly.

In this connection, it is interesting to note that on 21 March 1995 Mr Bernard Stasi, Mayor of Epernay, MEP and former French minister, tabled in the European Parliament a draft resolution on multilingual education, which should shortly come up for discussion.

This draft resolution **"calls for the adoption by the member States of the European Union of a clear project laying down a new strategy for the teaching of languages, from nursery school to university, by means of two teaching languages instead of one, leading to multilingualism which should become standard practice for school pupils of the future, thus preserving the essential diversity of languages and cultures which constitute the common heritage of Europe".**[1]

It is interesting to observe the similarities between this draft resolution and the concerns and hopes of Professor Claude Hagège of the *Collège de France*, an enthusiastic supporter of multilingual schooling, as he clearly demonstrated in an article recently published in the newspaper "Le Monde", from which it will suffice to quote two short excerpts:

- the **"courses of action"** he suggests **"assume that we are willing to shake off our longstanding inertia. The school syllabus should be taught in two languages from the very first years of schooling, ie in the mother tongue (eg for 3/5 of the subjects) and (2/5) in another modern language..."**

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[1] Translator's note: unofficial translation.

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- in view of the greater mobility of persons which will inevitably result from the construction of Europe, he also suggests that one solution to the crucial problem of teacher training would be to enable **"primary and secondary school teachers who teach their special subject in their mother tongue in schools abroad"** to take part **"in a programme of wide-ranging short-term exchanges with guarantees on career advance and status..."**

This is not a pipe-dream either if included in a language teaching policy that really takes account, both within the major European institutions and within individual countries, of the new needs that will necessarily flow from the increase in the number of international exchanges in the economic, scientific and cultural fields.

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D. Girard: **List of questions for group discussion**

1) At what age should children begin to learn a second language? Before 6 or 7 years of age ? (nursery school?)' between 6 and 8 ? (primary school?)

Points for consideration:

- the earlier one starts, the greater the educational benefits of bilingual schooling (the mental exercise required facilitates the learning of the language in question and of other languages, including the mother tongue and doubtless also of other subjects; it opens children's minds to the world and other cultures);

- the earlier one begins, the more teaching time will be required to meet the demand and provide continuity.

2) Until such time as the early teaching of languages, let alone bilingual schooling, can be made general, should children be selected ? If so, according to what criteria ?

3) What should be the geographical spread with regard to the early teaching of languages and bilingual schooling ?

What percentage of schools? Should there be special classes within the same school ?

4) Assuming that bilingual sections will be gradually extended as greater resources are made available, how should they be run?

5) How can possible errors in selecting pupils for early language learning or bilingual schooling be remedied in good time ?

6) What can be done to integrate pupils from other types of school (where foreign languages have traditionally been taught only after primary school) ?

- entrance tests ?
- special classes to bring pupils up to the same level ? (monolingual or partially bilingual pupils - family context or trips abroad)

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